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THE BOOK OF THE MONTH

FIGURATIVELY SPEAKING¹

BY LAWRENCE GILMAN

A WOMAN is like a gilded pill; she is like a melon; like a sovereign; like a sweet poison; like conjurers' tricks; like new plays; like a pot of oil; like a fortified town; like a bunch of grapes; like a thermometer; like a German clock; like a curst dog; like a fountain troubled; like a rose; like a polar needle; and like a flea. If it matters who said so, well, Balzac said so, and Congreve, and George Eliot, and Eugene Field, and Oliver Wendell Holmes, and Victor Hugo, and John Webster, and others—including, of course, the immortal Anon. And what is it like to be nervous? "Nervous as a watch," said the late F. Marion Crawford. "Nervous as a mouse," said Bernard Shaw. "Nervous as a *witch*," said the irrepressible Anon. To our taste, the choice lies between Shaw and Anon. But if you do not agree, you may examine for yourself the various similes recorded in the most absorbing book that we have encountered for a good many months—Mr. Frank J. Wilstach's unprecedented and delightful *Dictionary of Similes*.

This book, we said, is unprecedented. We have Mr. Wilstach's authority for the fact (and so far as our own fallible observation is concerned, he is incontrovertibly right) that this is the first attempt to make a comprehensive collection of similes from English and other languages. A gigantic, a staggering, undertaking, it would seem; yet here is its tangible and triumphant issue, in the form of a volume of almost 500 pages, with a twenty-seven-page index of authors ranging, in delectable catholicity, from George Ade to

¹ *A Dictionary of Similes*, by Frank J. Wilstach. Boston: Little, Brown, and Company, 1916.

Zoroaster, with pluckings along the way from such hilariously diverse sources as Aeschylus and Henry Ward Beecher, Max Beerbohm and the Bible, Josh Billings and Rupert Brooke, James Huneker and Adelaide E. Proctor, Artemus Ward and Byron, D'Annunzio and Chauncey M. Depew, Buddha and *Punch*, Euripides and Wallace Irwin, Henry James and Abraham Lincoln, Irvin Cobb and Dante, the Arabian Nights and the *New York Times*, Shelley and Agnes Repplier, Walter Pater and Ella Wheeler Wilcox, Martin Tupper and Arthur Symons, the Upanishads and George Washington, Carolyn and H. G. Wells, W. B. Yeats and Yankee Doodle and the Women's Petition against Coffee, Shakespeare and Simon Suggs, Sappho and Hamilton W. Mabie, Molière and Petrarch and George Herbert Sass—truly a carnival of eclecticism!

How, one cannot help wondering, did Mr. Wilstach contrive to read all these perpetrators of similes in a lifetime that is as yet, we believe, a long way from the Scriptural terminus? Did he begin at the age of three to devour Simon Suggs and the sermons of Henry Ward Beecher, hunting similes as greedily as—as—(here we consulted Mr. Wilstach's Dictionary in search of a simile for "greedy," but as we did not like Balzac's or John Skelton's or Leonard Wright's or the Scottish Proverb's or Anon's, we shall invent our own): as greedily as a puritan hunting vice? Did Mr. Wilstach breakfast upon the Women's Petition Against Coffee, lunch upon Chauncey M. Depew, dine upon Shakespeare, sup upon Mr. George Herbert Sass, and go to bed with the Works of Ella Wheeler Wilcox under his pillow? And how, one may wonder, did he chance to set out upon this prodigious quest?

It happened in this way: On a certain fine Spring day—not, you are amazed to learn, in the early 'seventies, but in 1894—Mr. Wilstach, marooned in Boston, was reading in the morning papers about some incident at the State House, and noticed that all the papers described the news as "spreading like wildfire." He asked a journalistic acquaintance if there was no substitute for "spread like wildfire," and was assured by the journalist that "he had never heard of news spreading in any other way." Perturbed by this evidence of figurative exiguity, Mr. Wilstach hurried to a bookstore and demanded a "dictionary of similes"—in vain: such a book had never been published. His own

Dictionary is the result of his subsequent effort to supply this deficiency. From that day Mr. Wilstach began to copy into a large blank-book the similes in every book he read. Later, he systematized his research, and, beginning with the Upanishads, he worked through the literature of the centuries down to Irvin Cobb. He abode in libraries, and was never seen without a book under his arm. He consorted with poets and clergymen, fictionists and essayists, parodists and seers, critics and *vers libristes*, historians and journalists, biologists and punsters and prophets and economists, best-sellers and jurists, founders of religions and of empires, Presidents, epoists, courtesans and saints.

Certain conclusions have taken shape in his mind as a result of this prodigious infatuation, and he gives us some diverting generalizations. Thus he has found that Homer and Virgil drew their similes largely from Nature; that new inventions had their effect upon the anxious quester of similes—as in Byron's reference to a gas-lit theatre in *Don Juan*, as in Holmes' use of the adding-machine as a comparison for certainty, as in a contemporaneous instance: "Sly as a submarine." He has noticed that poets have ever been upon familiar terms with the solar system—with the moon, of course, as favorite; that the ocean, the brook, flowers, birds (eagles preferred) have for centuries seduced the fancy of similizers. The moon, it appears, has lately—as Mark Twain said about acrobats who have lost their legs—"ceased to draw," while the eagle remains as popular as a munition stock before the Peace talk. In the use of similes, says Mr. Wilstach, Chaucer, Shakespeare, Spenser, Shelley, and Swinburne were the most profuse—Swinburne leading. The most economical poetic similizer was Whitman: yet Whitman, in his apostrophe to the sea, achieved one of the mightiest similes in the language: one which Mr. Wilstach would do well to include in a future edition of his book, sacrificing, perhaps, to make room for it, an example from Opie Read or N. P. Willis or Lydia Sigourney or Ouida—who is represented eighty-eight times.

Certain considerations flow out of one's intercourse with Mr. Wilstach's ineluctable pages. One perceives, for example, to how slight a degree imaginative prose need depend upon simile. In Mr. Wilstach's collection, Henry James is represented by only nine examples, Maeterlinck by five, Defoe by four, Pater and Newman by three apiece, Plato, Sir

Thomas Browne, and George Moore by two each. To be sure, some of these apportionments are a little surprising. In the case of Henry James, for example, one suspects that Mr. Wilstach lacked persistence, for Henry James luxuriates in figurative speech, and he achieved miracles in its use—he is, indeed, one of the most imaginative and felicitous imagists in literature. Mr. Wilstach's deepest and richest mine—and the great exception to the generalization we made above—is, of course, George Meredith, whose only superior in respect of profusion and eloquence of imagery was “the starre of poets”; and Meredith's similes, though for sheer beauty they cannot match Shakespeare's, are, on the whole, more vivid and more daringly imaginative. There are one hundred and twenty-six items in Mr. Wilstach's Meredithian list. Many of them are representative; but we were sorry not to find among them certain superlative examples.

Obviously, as the compiler remarks in his preface, his garnering is of necessity incomplete; and we can think of no one who might have accomplished this gargantuan adventure more satisfactorily than Mr. Wilstach: for he has shown liberality, fine taste, and an admirable susceptibility to contemporary excellence. It is pleasant to find here that quite matchless inspiration of Mr. Irvin Cobb's: “No more privacy than a goldfish;” the simply achieved beauty of Mr. Franklin P. Adams' “Sad as the sunless sea” gratifies us more than Swinburne's rhetorical “Sad as doom;” and there are few things so destructively ironic in the entire book as this of Mr. Simeon Strunsky's: “Christianity is like the neutrality of Belgium, which is guaranteed by all nations and inviolate in times of peace, but which must not be allowed to stand in the way of the interests of a people or the road to great things.” But while we celebrate Mr. Wilstach's unfettered and courageous taste, we find ourselves quarrelling frequently with his particular elections. Why, for instance, among the four examples under “Caress,” did he include De Maupassant's banal “Caressing as a kiss,” and ignore that marvellous picture of a threatened and dreaded caress from *The Egoist*—one of the superb triumphs of graphic imagery in the language? Here it is, for his second edition:

“I am not cold,” said Clara; “someone, I suppose, was walking on my grave.” *The gulf of a câress hove in view like an enormous billow hollowing under the curled ridge. She stooped to a buttercup; the monster swept by.*

And, under "Walk," could he not have spared that contribution by the usually admirable Anon, "Walked like a chicken with frozen toes" (which, to be sure, has its points), to make room for what we shall hold to be, until corrected, the loveliest simile for this verb in English?

She walked not like one blown against, resembling rather the day of the South-West driving the clouds.

That, too, is from *The Egoist*, and we think it is not only lovelier, but more graphic, than the famous and stilted lines that Mr. Wilstach has chosen from Byron's *Hebrew Melodies*. We recognize that it is the obvious thing for a reviewer to dig for omissions in a work of this character—it is the easy critical approach to it. But we are not idly intent upon exhibiting unavoidable deficiencies in Mr. Wilstach's book. These missing similes whose absence we have deplored are among the outstanding ones in our literature—the "caress" simile from *The Egoist* is incomparable for originality and imaginative wit; and it is a pity that this *Dictionary of Similes*, which will soon be a standard work of reference, does not contain it. You would as soon expect not to find the Gettysburg Address in an anthology of orations, or not to find "Our birth is but a sleep and a forgetting" in Bartlett.

But the Dictionary is much more remarkable for what Mr. Wilstach has put in it than for what he has left out. Especially is it remarkable for its open-mindedness to modern achievement. Mr. Wilstach has not, like many compilers, been afraid of modernity. His book is indeed flagrantly, egregiously, contemporaneous; and, time and again, the moderns come off surprisingly well, even in direct competition with the classic masters. We prefer Francis Thompson's "Old as hope" to Shakespeare's "Old as Sibylla"; we like Henry James' "Calm as if she were always sitting for her portrait" better than Browning's "Calm as a babe new-born" (was not Browning here defective in closeness of observation?); and we rank James Huneker's "Dangerous as hammering dynamite" above Hugo's "Dangerous as the foamy race of ocean surges" (yet how superb is Hugo's "Nameless as God"!).

There are curiosities by the way in this endlessly diverting book—as the five columns of similes for the adjective "pale" and the nine columns for "white," as against the complete absence of any simile at all for the sun, for sunset,

or for sunrise: which means that we do not get Kipling's magnificent image, nor that figure of marvellous and pathetic beauty out of Rossetti, which we love to quote because it is never quoted by anyone else:

The sunrise blooms and withers on the hill
Like any hill-flower; and the noblest troth
Dies here to dust. . . .

There is, as an even greater curiosity, the fact that almost the least expressive of these hoarded similes was written by one of the most eloquent poets of our time. It is this simile for Poetry: "Poetry is to philosophy what the Sabbath is to the rest of the week." That was written by William Butler Yeats.

Richly pleasurable as it is, we do not perceive the utility of Mr. Wilstach's collection as an aid to writers, save for those who would willingly deal in the second-hand. For congressmen, political orators, very minor poets, third-rate editorial writers, fourth-rate clergymen, authors of best-sellers, Chautauqua moralists—for all those who have a fatalistic conception of style—this book will be manna. But for self-respecting writers, it will be useful chiefly as a deterrent. The writer who would filch from Mr. Wilstach's hoard is the writer who would formerly have used, with an inward glow of discovery, such depreciated currency as "Proud as a peacock," "Busy as a bee," "Cold as ice." For such, Mr. Le Gallienne's "Proud as a young bull," Rex Beach's "Busy as a cross-eyed boy at a three-ring circus," and Maeterlinck's "Cold as an earth worm," will be as jewels in an ash-heap. For others, Mr. Wilstach's book will be treasurable chiefly as what the anthologists call a "private luxury"—for solace and intellectual revelry: not for use. A simile should be as virginal as a new tooth-brush, as self-sprung as a beard, as personally selected as a sweet-heart. The writer who would knowingly borrow a simile would borrow a wife.

LAWRENCE GILMAN.